

"Blessed is he who gives me what I want"

John 12:12-19

Mark Vroegop

12 The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" 14 And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

16 His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. 17 The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. 18 The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:12-19).

At a tomb on the outskirts of Bethany is Jesus, Mary, Martha, and a crowd of people. Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus, died days ago. Jesus orders the tomb to be opened and he prays. And then he cries out, "Lazarus, come out!"

Suddenly, a linen-clad man appears at the entrance of the tomb. He is bound from head to toe with white strips of cloth. Some people run to him and unbind his face. It is Lazarus! The crowd is stunned. Jesus has just raised a man from the dead. Two men sprint down the road leading to Jerusalem.

It was a stunning miracle, and it created a frenzy in Israel. The chief priests and Pharisees called for an emergency session of the Council. John 11:47-53 tells us what they were thinking:

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God

who are scattered abroad. 53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death (John 11:47-53).

Part of the reason why the religious leaders were so nervous was because it was the time of Passover, one of three annual festivals for the Jewish people (Passover, Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles). Jerusalem would be filled with pilgrims from all over the nation. Josephus, the early church historian, talks about crowds in excess of 2.5 million.¹ And talk about Jesus was buzzing in the air.

55 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. 56 They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?" 57 Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him (John 11:55-57).

Do you see the tension? Lazarus was just raised from the dead, a major festival is taking place in a week, hundreds of thousands of people are pouring into Jerusalem, the talk about Jesus is spreading, and the religious leaders are feeling very, very nervous. Jesus is no longer hiding. He is about to enter Jerusalem. It is approaching the last week of his life.

Tragedy at the Triumphal Entry

This is the setting of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. Often it is called Palm Sunday, and it is an important moment in the life of Jesus. It is more than just a story; it is part of the Jesus path to the cross. It tells us a lot about him and about people.

But for all the fanfare, cheering, and enthusiasm, the triumphal entry of Jesus is really a tragedy. It shows us how different Jesus' agenda is from the agenda of people. It shows us how easy it is to cheer for King who gives you what you want. But it also shows us how quickly that can change.

The triumphal entry is a warning: Beware of following Jesus with your agenda.

What people were thinking

That background helps us understand the environment in which this narrative takes place. But there is more here. We pick up a number of clues as to what the people in the crowds were thinking.

¹¹ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), p. 583 –note 35.

According to John 12:12 it was Tuesday, four days before Jesus would be crucified and five days before the Passover, when Jesus made his entrance into Jerusalem. The crowd heard that Jesus was making his way from Bethany to Jerusalem.

There were three groups of people who gathered as a part of this moment, and we get a sense as to what each is thinking.

The crowd

12 The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:12-13).

This moment is pregnant with symbolism and meaning.

Military rulers and conquerors entered cities in a somewhat similar fashion. If a Roman general was victorious on foreign soil, killed at least 5,000 of the enemy, and gained new territory, he was given a Roman triumph when he returned.²

They held palm branches which were the national symbol of victory for the nation of Israel. Palms were used at the rededication of the temple in 164 BC and after Israel won independence in 141 BC. They are also used in Revelation 7:9 as those in heaven cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb." Palm branches symbolized national pride, liberation, and victory.³

They were quoting Psalm 118:25 which is a Psalm of victory over their enemies, and they are saying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord even the King of Israel." It was a prayer that God would fight for his people once again. And the crowd's expectation is that Jesus was going to be their national deliverer.

The crowds thought that finally someone had come to relieve them from the oppression of Rome. They heard about the resurrection of Lazarus. People who saw it first-hand were testifying about it, and the masses gathered to see this powerful teacher who they believed would rescue them from the oppression of an occupying force. The crowds believed that Jesus could give them relief.

² Warren Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: ChariotVictor Publishing, 1989).

³ F.F. Bruce, The Gospel of John, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 259.

A few days later the culture of the city would change, and the crowds would mock him, crying out "Crucify Him!" Once they realized that Jesus wasn't going to give them what they wanted, he was useless to them. They chose a murderer named Barabbas over him.

The disciples

John 12:14-16 tells us that Jesus enters the city on a donkey, fulfilling prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that the coming King would be a man of peace since a donkey was a humble animal.

And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him (John 12:14-16).

They simply missed what was really going on. Luke 19:38 records that the disciples were saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." No doubt they must have thought that Jesus was bringing in the long-awaited kingdom, and that they were going to be a prominent part of it.

The disciples frequently wrestled with the question of Jesus kingdom and their position. According to Matthew's account, the mother of James and John asked for them to be given prominent seats just prior to the triumphal entry (Matt 20:20-27). We know from Luke 22:24 that a few days after the Triumphal entry the disciples argued about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. Further, we know from John 13 that the disciples do not understand that Jesus is going to die or how weak they are. Peter even suggests that he would lay his life down for Jesus, only to have Jesus say, "the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times (John 13:38)."

The disciples missed the real purpose of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the effect was devastating upon them and Jesus. Peter completely misunderstands Jesus' mission, and at the arrest of Jesus attacks the High Priest's servant, cutting off his ear (John 18:10-11). Matthew 27:56 tells us that at the arrest of Jesus all his disciples left him and fled. Peter fulfills the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 27:69-75 when he denies Jesus three times.

The disciples thought Jesus was going to usher in the Kingdom, and that they would be men of power. And when this doesn't materialize they shift from "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" to "I don't know the man!"

When Jesus couldn't give the disciples what they wanted, they abandoned him

The Religious Leaders

The final group that is in the crowd is the religious leaders. And what do they want? They wanted to retain their power, and Jesus threatened it.

19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19)

Remember the earlier passage we read in John 11:48? "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Caiaphas, the high priest, even suggests that it would be better for him to die than for the entire nation should perish (John 11:59). The religious leaders were afraid that Jesus was going to destroy the nation, and I'm convinced that they believed that they were doing God's work. They had to save Israel from Jesus!

How tragic and ironic! The religious leaders thought they were doing God work, but they were destroying it. They thought Jesus was a threat, but he was really their savior. They knew the Scriptures, but they missed the One who was promised.

They wanted a familiar religion, and when Jesus threatened it – they killed him.

What Jesus was thinking

The interesting thing about the Triumphal entry is that Jesus is on a totally different page. They have no idea what kind of king he really is. Jesus is operating in categories that are unfamiliar. He is bringing something that they do not want.

We get a hint of what Jesus was thinking from the passages that follow. Listen to his words:

24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25).

31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:31-32).

The crowds wanted relief from Rome, and Jesus was going to bring them relief from a greater, more oppressive enemy – their own sin. The disciples wanted positions of greatness, honor, and authority; Jesus was calling them to give up their lives. The religious rulers thought that they were doing God's will, trying to protect the nation. In reality they were doing the bidding of Satan, and they killed the Son of God.

Oh how different is Jesus' agenda for the agenda of people. The tragedy of the triumphal entry is how off chanting crowds, devoted disciples, and religious rulers can be. And the common link between them all was this: they all wanted something from Jesus.

The crowds wanted relief. The disciples wanted honor. The religious leaders want security. And when Jesus threatened those desires, everything changed. The crowds discarded him. The disciples abandoned him. The religious leaders murdered him. All because Jesus threatened what they wanted.

Cautions

So what do you want from Jesus? What's your agenda? Do you think that you would be any different than the crowds, disciples, or religious leaders? I don't think we would.

In light of that let me give you a few cautions:

1. Beware of an over-confident heart

I am struck with the crass over-confidence of the disciples who think they know Jesus' plan and their own hearts. But the real story is that they don't know either one! The Bible frequent reminds us about the dangerous fickleness of the human heart (see Jeremiah 17:9, Deut 8:11-17, 29:19). Let us be reminded that we are prone to wander! We are prone to shift allegiances in seconds. Oh let us be fearful of an over-confident heart.

2. Beware of belief in a crowd

It is striking to me how quickly a crowd can shift from saying "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!" It is stunning for me to think that the disciples who hearts were so full of love for Jesus when he washed their feet all flee for their lives when he is arrested. It reminds me that peer pressure is not just a teenage issue; it is a human issue.

Crowds can convince us to believe things we don't – for good or bad. A bad crowd can cause you to say and do things that completely violate who you claim to be. A good crowd can make you feel like you are just like them – when you are not. It is a wonderful gift to be raised in a Christian home with Christian parents, but do not assume that because you are in a Christian crowd that you are a follower of Jesus. Beware of belief in a crowd.

3. Beware of making Jesus your lackey

The crowd, the disciples, and even the Pharisees all wanted something from Jesus. And they all missed him. That is what happens when you view Jesus as your lackey. When you come to Jesus because of secondary needs – like a restored marriage, obedient kids, internal happiness,

a better job, fixed up finances, a changed spouse, a drug-free life – it is too easy to make him your servant. All of those things can be fixed by Jesus, but they are the fruit of surrendering to Jesus. Oh let us beware of coming to Jesus, like the rich young ruler, because of what we want (Luke 18:18-30).

4. Beware of confusing your agenda with God's

There was something that the disciples had in common with the religious leaders. Both confused their agendas with God's. The disciples are convinced that Jesus is bringing in the Kingdom. The religious leaders thought that Jesus was out to destroy the Kingdom. So the disciples squabble about who is greatest, and Peter cuts off the priest's ear. The religious leaders determine to kill Jesus.

It is a dangerous thing when you believe your agenda is God's agenda. Let us be sure that we know the Word of God. Let us be sure that we know what God says. And let us be sure that we continually order our lives in light of the Word. Let us be careful in our judgments of other people. Let us be cautious in determining God's will. And let us be reminded that God doesn't need our help to fight his battles.

5. Beware of religion without relationship

As I read the various narratives in the other gospels, I was shocked over and over the fact that the people who were Jesus' greatest challenge were supposed to be the most spiritual. But they missed it. They schemed, plotted, bribed, lied, manipulated, and in the end murdered the Son of God! And they did it all under the banner of being religious.

Oh let us be warned today about the dangers of religion without relationship. Judaism was supposed to be about the one True God and loving him with all the heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5). But somehow, as often happens, it became about the form.

And so let me remind you that Christianity makes no sense without knowing Jesus. Let us be sure that we know Jesus or it won't be long until we become 21st Century Pharisees, justifying our sinful hearts with religious language.

So what do you want from Jesus? Relief? Power? Security? The Triumphal entry reminds us that Jesus doesn't always give us what we want. Thank God for that. But it also reminds us that Jesus came to **change** what we want. And it took the **cross** to accomplish that!

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